

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 SAM-01 OMB-01 ARA-06 /077 W

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P R 280925Z DEC 75

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5671

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY PRAGUE

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

AMEMBASSY WARSAW

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 5160

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, SY

SUBJ: EGYPTIAN ALLEGATIONS OF MASSIVE ARRESTS OF SYRIAN
COMMUNISTS UNFOUNDED.

1. SUMMARY. EGYPTIAN PRESS WRONG IN REPORTING
SARG HAS RECENTLY ARRESTED 300 MEMBERS OF SYRIAN COMMUNIST
PARTY (CPS). WHILE A FEW PARTY SYMPATHIZERS MAY HAVE BEEN
ARRESTED OVER PAST MONTHS, CURRENT TENSION BETWEEN CPS AND SARG
DERIVES FROM RECENTLY GOVT-IMPOSED BAN ON TRAVEL ABROAD
BY CPS MEMBERS. THIS FOLLOWS DISPUTE BETWEEN CPS AND RULING BAATH
PARTY OVER INTERPRETATION OF NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE FRONT REGULATIONS
GOVERNING UNIFIED PARTY REPRESENTATION OF SYRIA AT INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCES, ATTEMPTS BY CPS TO MAKE INROADS IN TRADITIONAL
BAATHI PRESERVES OF SYRIAN MILITARY AND UNIVERSITY CIRCLES, AND
PERHAPS OTHER DIFFERENCES AS WELL. UNABLE EXPLAIN TIMING FOR THIS
HEIGHTENED TENSION BETWEEN CPS AND SARG BUT CONSIDER IT UNLIKELY
THAT CPS ACTING UP AT SOVIET INSPIRATION. END SUMMARY.

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2. REPORTS CARRIED IN DEC 26 EGYPTIAN PRESS WERE QUICKLY CIRCULATED BY BBC, VOA AND ISRAELI BROADCASTS ALLEGING THAT SYRIA HAD LAUNCHED MASSIVE CAMPAIGN OF ARRESTS DEC 24 AGAINST MEMBERS OF CPS BECAUSE OF "FOREIGN POLICY DIFFERENCES." IT WAS ONLY LATE ON 26TH WHEN "OFFICIAL SYRIAN SOURCE" SPOKE OUT TO DENY ANY SUCH ARRESTS HAD TAKEN PLACE.

3. WE ARE INCLINED CREDIT SYRIAN DENIAL AND BELIEVE THAT EGYPTIAN REPORT IS DISTORTED VERSION OF RECENTLY IMPOSED TRAVEL BAN ON CPS MEMBERS. ACCORDING TO WESTERN EMBOFF WHO TALKED WITH CUBAN EMBOFF AND REPORTED CONVERSATION TO US, PROBLEMS AROSE OVER RECENT VISITS BY CPS SEC GEN KHALID BAKDASH TO BUDAPEST AND CPS DEPSEC GEN YUSUF FAYSAL TO WARSAW. SARG APPARENTLY DISSATISFIED WITH SOME (UNSPECIFIED) POLICY COMMENTS MADE BY THESE CPS LEADERS AND CLAMPED INDEFINITE BAN ON THEIR TRAVEL OUTSIDE SYRIA, TOGETHER WITH SIMILAR BAN ON TRAVEL BY LARGE NUMBER OF THEIR CPS COLLEAGUES. BAKDASH WAS PEEVED AT THIS BECAUSE HE PLANNING TO SEND CPS DELEGATES TO ACCOMPANY BAATH DELEGATION INVITED TO CUBAN COMMUNIST PARTY CONGRESS IN HAVANA (NOTE: DEC. 16 PRESS REPORTED BAATH PARTY DEPSEC GEN ABDULLAH AL-AHMAR DEPARTED THAT DAY TO ATTEND HAVANA CONGRESS). SUBSEQUENTLY BAKDASH CONTACTED TWO CPS MEMBERS WHO OUTSIDE SYRIA WHEN BAN IMPOSED AND ORDERED THEM TO HAVANA CONFERENCE.

4. SAME WESTERN EMBOFF MET EVENING DEC 26 WITH A CPS SPOKESMAN, MURAD QUWATLI, WHO TOLD HIM THAT EGYPTIAN ALLEGATIONS OF THREE HUNDRED ARRESTS UNTRUE, BUT ASSERTED SOME LOW-LEVEL PARTY SYMPATHIZERS HAD BEEN PICKED UP INDIVIDUALLY OVER RECENT MONTHS FOR CRITICIZING REGIME. (NOTE: OFTEN RELIABLE SYRIAN SOURCE TOLD US ABOUT TEN DAYS AGO THAT EIGHT-TEN CPS MEMBERS HAD BEEN DETAINED BY GOVT RECENTLY BUT HE AS YET UNABLE TO PROVIDE MORE DETAILED INFO). QUWATLI ADDED, ACCORDING TO SOURCE, THAT TRAVEL BAN HAD BEEN IMPOSED ON CPS AND THAT SOME SARG OFFICIALS AT DAMASCUS AIRPORT HAD BEEN DETAINED LAST WEEK FOR PERMITTING PARTY MEMBER TO DEPART SYRIA.

5. AMB DISCUSSED RELATIONS BETWEEN CPS AND REGIME SEPARATELY WITH NASSERIST MIN CULTURE, FAWZI KAYYALI AND YUGOSLAV AMB. PEKIC DEC 27 AND LEARNED THAT SARG IN FACT HAS RECENTLY

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LISTED 450 CPS MEMBERS AS PROSCRIBED FROM TRAVELLING OUTSIDE SYRIA. WIFE OF SEC GEN BAKDASH SHORT TIME BACK PERMITTED TO TRAVEL TO INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S CONGRESS IN BERLIN DESPITE PRESENCE OF HER NAME ON LIST. THIS LED TO ARREST OF DAMASCUS AIRPORT OFFICIALS FOR LAX SECURITY PRACTICES. SHE HAS SINCE RETURNED, AND BOTH SHE AND HER HUSBAND WERE SEEN AT VIETNAMESE EMBASSY RECEPTION DEC 22. DURING RECEPTION PEKIC WAS TOLD BY KHALID BAKDASH THAT SARG HAD TAKEN

OFFENSE AT BAKDASH'S RENEWED ATTEMPTS TO UNDERMINE SYRO-AMERICAN OFFSHORE OIL EXPLORATION AGREEMENT (NOTE: BAKDASH'S FIRST ATTEMPT TOOK PLACE JUNE 1975, REPORTED IN DAMASCUS 2102 AND 2355) AND HIS PRESSING FOR RECONCILIATION BETWEEN IRAQ AND SYRIA. WE UNABLE CONFIRM THAT BAKDASH HAS HIMSELF SINCE "FLED" TO PRAGUE BUT ARE INCLINED TO DOUBT IT.

6. KAYYALI CLAIMED THAT BAATH LEADER AL-AHMAR HAD RECENTLY CALLED IN YUSUF FAYSAL FOR DRESSING DOWN ON ALLEGED CPS ATTEMPT TO EXPAND ITS INFLUENCE WITHIN SYRIAN MILITARY AND AMONG UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY, STRESSING THAT THESE WERE BAATHIST PRESERVES WITH WHICH OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES FORBIDDEN TO TAMPER. HE ALSO WARNED FAYSAL THAT CPS COULD SEND ITS EMISSARIES ABROAD TO INTERNATIONAL GATHERINGS ONLY AS PART OF OFFICIAL SYRIAN DELEGATION, WHICH WOULD OF COURSE BE HEADED BY BAATHISTS. AHMAR STRESSED THAT SYRIA WOULD SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE ABROAD. FAYSAL HOWEVER CHALLENGED AHMAR ON SECOND POINT, CLAIMING THAT CHARTER OF NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE FRONT DID NOT FORBID CPS THIS TYPE OF ACTIVITY OUTSIDE SYRIA.

7. COMMENT: FOREGOING SUGGESTS THAT CPS CHAFING WITHIN CONSTRAINTS OF ITS PRESENT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BAATH PARTY, ITS MAJOR PARTNER IN THE PROGRESSIVE NATIONAL FRONT. SARG FOR ITS PART MAY BE PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE TO ACTIVITIES OF CPS AT THIS MOMENT GIVEN SARG'S AWARENESS OF APPARENTLY SUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT BY LEBANESE COMMUNIST PARTY TO PROMOTE ITS OWN POSITION DURING LEBANESE CRISIS (SEE COMMENT BY SHIHABI PARA 4 DAMASCUS 5151 NOTAL).

8. WE FIND TIMING OF THIS LATEST INCREASE IN TENSION INVOLVING CPS ODD. PARTY HAS NOT BEEN KNOWN TO DEVIATE SIGNIFICANTLY
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FROM SOVIET-INSPIRED POLICY LINES. WE ASSUME THAT DESPITE SOME PRESENT DIVERGENCE BETWEEN SYRIA AND SOVIET UNION ON BEST FORUM FOR ME PEACE NEGOTIATIONS SOVIETS WOULD WANT TO EMPHASIZE THEIR FULL SUPPORT FOR ASAD AT PRESENT JUNCTURE AND GENERALLY PLAY THEIR CARDS CAUTIOUSLY DURING PERIOD JUST PRIOR TO UNSC DEBATE ON MIDDLE EAST. IN ANY CASE WE AS YET HAVE NO EVIDENCE OF SOVIET INVOLVEMENT IN OR INSPIRATION OF LATEST EVENTS, WHICH SARG UNSUCCESSFULLY TRIED TO HANDLE WITH MINIMUM OF FUSS AND PUBLICITY.
MURPHY

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